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Dario Robleto

Say Goodbye To Substance



(Re)Making the World:

Dario Robleto's Say Goodbye To Substance

If we as a generation have been given nothing but the wreckage of the past, then I say thank God for that...We are all social archaeologists now—mining raw history and actively participating in its critique and reconstruction/re-enchantment. Let the digging begin.

—DARIO ROBLETO

We live in a time of extraterrestrial hopes and anxieties.

—MARTIN AMIS, *INVASION OF THE SPACE INVADERS*

Are we unique? Are we something utterly special in the universe? Or are we an example of many, many different civilizations that have emerged, many, many different life forms?

—Sample used in "Are we here" by ORBITAL, *SNIVILISATION*

Dario Robleto's work is deeply rooted in a desire for regeneration—a mad scientist's version of cultural archaeology, developing a newly envisioned song of the future with an alchemical beat. Through meticulous research into materials and historical/pop cultural systems ranging from music to paleontology to space travel, Robleto creates enticingly intimate objects that weave a tale of an alternate world. Based deeply in the power of music and its inherent possibilities for transformation, Robleto limns his multiple narratives into propositions for the future. He likens his process to that of a DJ—mixing, sampling, recombining—but his is an evolution in aesthetic strategy, serving not so much to undermine notions of originality and authorship as to acknowledge the weight of meaning that objects and materials carry. Robleto locates the revolutionary impact of sampling as “a youth cultural movement that actually cherished history—there is no such thing as a good DJ who is historically ignorant.” Similarly, his work builds narrative webs, with multiple layers of stories and ideas that reinvent the past in order to reinvigorate the future. Robleto is, above all, a master storyteller—a raconteur in the ancient way, in which pleasure and engagement are symbiotic with criticality, reinvention, and wisdom.

Robleto's wryly humorous titles and elaborate materials lists are critical aspects of the work, reflecting the way he builds his objects almost as if he were writing a complex text. The weight of information inherent in Robleto's materials and his process—what he calls “clues to the story”—is an integral part of the exhibition. The text following each entry is in the artist's voice, his own walk-through of the exhibition. My additional information and commentary in [blue](#) similarly gestures to Robleto's interest in layered narrative, here physically coexisting with his own story.

—SHAMIM M. MOMIN

Popular Hymns Will Sustain Us All (End It All), 2000–2001. 10 parts, wood, Plexiglas, lighting system, approximately 65 x 60 x 60 in. Collection of artist; courtesy of Inman Gallery, Houston

1. *I Can't Stop You From Taking Everything I Have (I Don't Really Want To)* Seashells, homemade sand (hand-ground seashells, indigenous rocks, fish bones, crab shells, etc.), cast vinyl pearls made from Neil Young and Crazy Horse's record “Cortez The Killer,” homemade bouncing balls (sodium silicate, alcohol), plaster, spray paint, approximately 52 x 24 x 24 in.

2. *Heavy Metal Mining Machine Corporation* Sand selenite, copper, iron, gold dust, homemade sand, acrylic tubing filled with melted vinyl of Steppenwolf's record “Born To Be Wild,” hand-ground prehistoric Colombian amber, polyester resin, spray paint, approximately 70 x 24 x 24 in.

3. *Aesthetics 2214 (Being A Vertebrate (I Wish I Was))* Sulfur-coated beeswax, homemade crystals (monoammonium phosphate, water, dye), acrylic tubing filled with melted vinyl from Kraftwerk's record “Man Machine,” Blue Morpho butterfly, vinyl butterfly antennae made of James Brown's record “Sex Machine,” mini disco ball, polyester resin, spray paint, approximately 52 x 20 x 20 in.



FIG. 2

1—Voyager 1 and 2 were launched, respectively, in August and September of 1977, and were slated to arrive at Jupiter in 1979 and Saturn in 1980. Both were equipped with 12-inch, gold-plated copper records designed by Carl Sagan that were meant to convey the diversity of life and culture on Earth, should they be encountered by another civilization. A needle and cartridge accompanied the records, along with instructions in symbolic language that explained the origin of the spacecraft and indicated how the record was to be played. Each record contained 115 images and a variety of natural sounds, such as those made by surf, wind, and thunder, as well as birds, whales, and other animals. They also contained musical selections from different cultures and eras, spoken greetings in 55 languages ranging from ancient Sumerian to modern-day Chinese, and messages from President Jimmy Carter and U.N. Secretary General Kurt Waldheim. Traveling faster than its successor, Voyager 1 is presently about 11 billion kilometers from the Earth and is moving away at a speed of 17 km/s. Light from the Earth takes over 11 hours to reach Voyager 1; in the past few months, scientists have determined that we have received the last faint return signals from the ship.

2—In his earlier work, Robleto developed a process in which he scratched vinyl records into powder and used the dust in a reconstituted medium to create his sculptures. In a sense, he aimed to capture the soul of the music through a transformation of its own medium. The layered

4. *I Wanna Rock My Little Honda Across The Universe* Homemade crystals, 50,000-year-old meteorite fragment (nickel, iron), ground amino acids, melted vinyl and vinyl fragments from The Beatles' record "Across The Universe," antique metal and glass syringe, rust, spray paint, plaster, polyester resin, approximately 54 x 18 x 18 in.

5. *Disco On Europa* Homemade crystals, Green Blumei butterfly, butterfly antennae made of Donna Summer's vinyl record "I Feel Love," polyester resin, approximately 51 x 12 x 12 in. (FIG. 1)

6. *A Pair Of Spinning Pop Stars Tethered By A Ribbon Of Gas And Dust (Lust)* Sulfur-coated beeswax, amethyst, prehistoric Colombian amber, homemade crystals, altered record covers, paper, foamcore, glue, prehistoric whale bone dust, melted vinyl of Nirvana's record "In Bloom" and Marvin Gaye's record "Mercy Mercy Me (The Ecology)," gunpowder, antibiotics, polyester resin, letraset, spray paint, approximately 52 x 22 x 22 in. (FIG. 2)

7. *Stuck In Amber With You Is All I Wish To Do* Beeswax, hand-ground prehistoric Colombian amber, *Eurema Petrocola* butterflies, vinyl butterfly antennae made of Peggy Lee's record "Is That All There Is" and Pulp's record "Common People," butterfly nectar, plaster, paint, approximately 44 x 12 x 12 in.

8. *A Dark Day For The Dinosaurs* Prehistoric cave bear digit, lighter made from dissolved 8-track recording of Black Sabbath's "Iron Man," flame made from melted vinyl record of T. Rex's "Life's A Gas," wire, spray paint, approximately 40 x 19 x 9 in. (FIG. 3)

9. *This Mineral I Call A Beat* Silver ore, olivine, apache tear, calcite, copper ore, onyx, fluorite, unakite, rhodonite, ivory magnesite, zinc, carbon, amino acids, iron pyrite, hemlock, sulfur, cubic zirconia, obsidian, yellow jasper, rose quartz, mica, amethyst, diabase, marble, chrysorolla, lepidolite, galea, plaster, melted vinyl and dissolved audio tape recordings of Roy Orbison's "In Dreams," spray paint, marker, approximately 46 x 19 x 9 in.

10. *Falsetto Can Be A Weapon* Hand-carved fossilized mammoth ivory, each tip laced with melted vinyl from Tammy Wynette's record "Stand By Your Man," hand-carved driftwood, leather pouch, twine, approximately 49 x 10 x 10 in.

The exhibition's central sculpture, *Popular Hymns Will Sustain Us All (End It All)*, sets the tone for the whole show, and the story that I developed for it has dictated what I have built around it. *Popular Hymns* is based on the Voyager spacecraft. I was around 8 years old when the Voyager left our solar system. There was a number you could call to hear its last message. I was excited at the idea, but when I called, it was just a series of beeps. It was such a lesson about science as science: what I had considered the romance of space was really just ones and zeroes, in a way its own romance but not what I had in mind. I've always held on to that disappointment—it felt so important, even at



FIG. 3

mically illuminates the top of each pedestal makes it appear as if it is ready for liftoff. The lights alternate to four different beats of music—different popular hymns.

I limited myself to 10 sculptures, each based on preceding vinyl work but with new materials.² The sculpture *A Dark Day For The Dinosaurs* is founded on an actual cave bear digit. Many scientists believe that this particular species of cave bear was the first animal that humans pushed to extinction. The bears were competing for caves at the same significant moment that humans were exerting dominance on other species for the first time. So this is the origin of what has become a bigger problem in our history.

Of course, the vinyl records that I choose to make my objects from play an important part in telling the story. Perched on the tip of the cave bear digit is a lighter that I made from dissolved 8-track recordings of Black Sabbath's "Iron Man." The flame is made from T-Rex's "Life's A Gas." In the history of rock and roll, there is an ongoing extinction: rock is always supposedly "dead." Here I took two forms—heavy metal and glam rock—that have gone the way of dinosaurs as art forms but are still evocative of specific moments. The play on words is not just with the song titles—the ephemeral lightness

that age, to find that something you envision as so deep, so profound, in the end isn't quite like that.

The spirit of the Voyager has always intrigued me: essentially, it was a mixed tape of humankind. Imagine being Carl Sagan and selecting what was to be included on that mission in the event of an alien encounter; what a privilege it must have been for him to be the DJ that sampled our world.¹ What pressure he must have felt in making the mixed tape of humankind—you don't want to forget anything. I love that somebody at NASA thought, just in case, let's have our story on board. Such things meant a lot to me when I was getting into science. For *Popular Hymns*, I wanted my own version of a mixed tape of humankind—to tell that story in sculpture. I wanted it to be a floating dance floor, with multiple platforms on each of which I attempted to address some moment or dilemma of human history. The piece is recessed at the bottom, so that it hovers slightly above the ground, and the lighting system that rhyth-

associations of the selected songs richly evoke music's nearly universal emotional power. As his work evolved, Robleto began combining this symbolic technique with other categorical systems—science, technology, history—and other loaded media, but his attention to materials and their associative power remains as rigorous as his conceptual research.

3—Robleto has said that songs are “liquid”—like water cycling in the atmosphere, changing composition but never disappearing. This seems an apt metaphor for the perseverance of humanity that *Popular Hymns* both critiques and celebrates. As a symbolic system, music provides the perfect ambiguity through which to filter ideas; it is endlessly adaptable and relevant to specific circumstances. The story of music has always been the story of humanity, from the great epic struggles of love and death, to the minor daily skirmishes of desire and despair.

4—Robleto's view of DJ culture—specifically sampling—as a truly transformative contemporary creative process is reflective of a larger cultural change from a deconstructive, post-modern remove to a reinvented notion of creation: neo-modern perhaps, or, searching for an altogether new term, even protofuturity. Taking as its motto a line from T.S. Eliot's *The Dry Salvages*, “Not fare well, But fare forward, voyagers,” it is characterized by a sincerity built out of deeply internalized cynicism and doubt, by hope engendered by the end of past practices, and by a



FIG. 4

of what we think so serious, coupled with the heroic celebration of humankind's aggressive nature—but also with the sculpture, which is essentially a translated version of the band names, Black Sabbath and T-Rex. The gesture being made in the sculpture is important as well—the role of the lighter in rock concerts. It comes out at the ballad or the last song, or at some heightened, dramatic moment. Here, I took the lighter out to say goodbye to the dinosaur, who is participating in his own farewell.

Another piece, entitled *Falsetto Can Be A Weapon*, is a small functional dart gun that I constructed. It is important to me that all my sculptures seem timeless. In this case, the gun appears to be a handcrafted, early hunter-gatherer artifact. In fact, it is hand-carved, fossilized ivory from a mammoth, another creature we pushed into extinction. Each piece of ivory is enlaced with what appears to be poison, made from melted vinyl. I used Tammy Wynette's “Stand By Your Man,” suggesting that perhaps something about the song could be seen as poisonous. This is a great but also controversial song, involving the complicated issues of women's roles and feminism. How could a woman take such a subservient role as to “stand by her man,” and yet who can deny the romance of

such a commitment? I like the implication that this song could literally become lethal—that in your bloodstream, the vinyl would attack your system and lead to your collapse. It is a play on what the song is about and what I am suggesting it does to your body: it may not be such a nice song after all. But it has a sort of poignant beauty in that, musically, it is also a complicated song, a particular style of country music. As the title of the overall piece implies, I wanted to represent a variety of popular forms of music in these works.³

The sculpture *This Mineral I Call A Beat* addresses artistic endeavors specific to a particular moment. There was a wonderful moment in early electronic music and hip hop sampling when certain instruments designed by Sony and Casio started to appear for the first time—instruments that were both used and abused by musicians. The misuse of early samples of keyboards and drum machines became the backbone of new and revolutionary forms of music. I was intrigued by the idea that misuse of an instrument could blossom into a whole new musical genre, as well as the larger idea of our relationship with technology and how it transforms things in unexpected ways.⁴ *This Mineral I Call A Beat* is an attempt to fulfill my desire of always wanting to have made one of those instruments. I've made this machine out of a number of raw materials and elements, as part of an investigation of how sound and material interact. For example, there is a button made of carved sulfur. What happens if you press this button? What does sulfur sound like? I am interested in the relationship between the way music is made and its direct impact on the body. A large amount of the same minerals that constitute our bodies is also found in the keyboard; so the piece also suggests the possibility that you could create someone, or something organic, by playing its keys. Or that by releasing sulfur sound, it would materialize into something else—almost transubstantiation. It is an instrument of multiple transformation, instead of merely being one for sound—one that translates into materials, into life.⁵

In *Popular Hymns*, through the selection of specific songs and sculptural forms, I wanted to address humankind's problem of destroying, as well as creating. In making a mixed tape of humankind, I wanted to address some fundamental problems. When the story of humanity is told someday, these problems will have to be included.⁶

Nowadays I Only Look Up To Pray, 2001–2002 Custom-made kaleidoscope, wood, brass, mirrors, hand-ground trinitite (glass produced during the first nuclear test explosion, when heat from the blast melted the surrounding sand), antique wood and brass tripod, dimensions variable. Collection of artist; courtesy of Inman Gallery, Houston (FIG. 4)

renewed belief in the future— one that synthesizes the dissolution of definitions with the possibility of creating new ones. It is critically situated within a reinterpreted notion of origin that emphasizes permutation and expanded vectors rather than a linear beginning or end, with a reinvigorated desire for emotional commitment. Robleto asks, "What if one said no to boredom, and demanded romance—not for a moment, but as a social formation? This is what the aesthetics of sampling offer—a re-enchantment with the world...Sampling is about having a profound respect for Foucault but only falling to your knees for Patsy Cline...It is based on gut, on rhythm, on soul."

⁵—Robleto has referred to the dance floor as a "site of redemption"—a striking use of religious terminology that, coupled with the sculpture's titular reference, evokes a notion of transformation through belief. The arrangement of *Popular Hymns'* 10 pedestals in contiguous, semi-circular form and blinking lights intended to recall a dance floor links this idea of redemption with his remaking of human history. The notion of transubstantiation offered via music modeled through *This Mineral I Call A Beat* also conjures a new faith through *Popular Hymns* overall, grounded both in the specificity of popular culture and the infinite imaginings evoked by space.

⁶—The narrative webs that structure all of Robleto's work rely on an expanded sense of time, beyond the strictly linear. In fact, *Popular Hymns* stems specifically from Robleto's observation of the "way we are determined

to control [time] by the creation of historical fantasies.” In making his own version of history, Robleto conflates different notions of time, ranging from the elastic experience of musical contemplation, the curious timelessness of memory, and stratified and expansive geological time, to the emphatic present of consumer culture and the curvature of space-time. The objects themselves are formally evocative of this diverse temporality, their rough, organic contours feel authentic yet they remain resistant to being placed in a specific period.

7—Death, or obsolescence, is inevitable for both humans and objects, and our ever-present knowledge of that terminality defines life. The existentialist philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) termed it being-toward-death: the transitory nature of the present is not taken to show its insignificance, or to lead to a form of life in which one ignores the present in favor of either the future or the past; rather, all experience becomes present experience. Music and narrative have always functioned with this assumption in mind, recognizing that everything miraculous in the world matters because of the inevitable fact of its passing, and moments have emotional weight because they are ephemeral. There is no human subjectivity that is not structured in relationship to a profound sense of loss. Robleto’s reuse and radical reinvention of pre-existing and often discarded objects acknowledge this condition, and seek at least a temporary immortality in face of this inevitable demise.

If A Meteorite Falls On Your Head Then God Was Aiming, 2002
Marbles made from impact glass (glass produced when a meteorite strikes the Earth and melts the surrounding sand), hand-ground human and dinosaur dust from femur bones, dimensions variable. Collection of artist; courtesy of Inman Gallery, Houston (FIG. 4)

As I mentioned, *Popular Hymns* dictated the rest of the show. The diptych *Nowadays I Only Look Up To Pray* and *If A Meteorite Falls On Your Head Then God Was Aiming* were meant to function together. The ideas in these works are similar to the central theme of *Popular Hymns*, in that they involve humankind dealing with problems; yet here it takes the form of self-annihilation.

The kaleidoscope in the first is custom-made; I worked with a toy maker to get the exact dimensions I wanted. The glass inside I treated like stained glass. It is trinitite, which is glass produced by a nuclear explosion—specifically, from the first test explosion in the United States in 1945. The physics of it is beautiful: the intense heat from the impact of the blast literally melted the desert sand into glass. It has this incredible historical resonance, being a remnant of the worst kind of explosion produced in history. Through the kaleidoscope, the viewer looks into the eye of the worst thing human beings can produce, yet it is made into an enjoyable experience, in a sense questioning how to relate to such an event.

The first piece, positioned to look down on the second, is created along similar lines but out of impact glass—glass that results from a meteorite crashing into the desert, where again the intense heat produces pure glass. I used this glass to make 10 marbles and sketched out a game being played in dust made of dinosaur and human bones. This is suggestive of how the dinosaurs died—by meteorite impact, a natural event. While this annihilation seems horrible, when viewed on a grand level it presents the idea that when one thing dies, another rises up to take its place. We are here now, and we have that meteorite to thank for it. 7

I’ve made that act into a game of marbles, where the parameters are made out of the dust of the creature that the “marbles” symbolically eradicated—evoking the issues of chance and retribution. The question of whether a species might “deserve” their annihilation—relevant in considering our own fate—is generated by the relationship of the two works together. Whether we do it to ourselves or it is an act of God, somehow we will end up as dust if we are not careful.



FIG. 5

Men Are The New Women, 2002 Bone dust, carbon, water extendable resin, pigments, dirt, engraved Plexiglas, polyurethane, mdf, light, 50 3/4 x 15 x 15 in. 1 of 2 from a complete set of rib bones. Collection of Linda Pace (FIG. 5)

When I used *Men Are The New Women* in a recent show, it was primarily a look at the effect of war on the body. The idea of transformation was set in the context of warfare's effects on the body, in which the soldier's body is the site of all kinds of people's politics. Less specifically, to use the body or the bones (the remains of the body) implies the destruction of the body. But when you take *Men Are The New Women* and put it in the context of *Popular Hymns*, it is pulled out of its center of gravity; I view it as a sort of bonus track.⁸ It is like some B-side you didn't get on the mixed tape. The whole exhibition is, in part, a commentary on our destructive habits, and *Men Are The New Women* is the "what-if" scenario.

Instead of warfare, the work's aspect of transformation—of remaking the origin—becomes prominent in this show. The biblical story of origin has always intrigued me: the idea of the female being produced from the male, that women didn't exist until men got lonely.⁹ As someone who is interested in materials, it always struck me that in this story women weren't even given their own molecules. In *Men Are The New Women*, the crucial act is taking a female rib, grinding it to dust, and recasting it as a male rib. It is a simple gesture—not technically, but rather that it can be stated so simply—and yet

⁸—Robleto applies his strategy of remixing not just within the specific objects, but also to their installation. By configuring a different set of work in each exhibition, the total group conveys an entirely new narrative based on their context. Certain conceptual threads rise to the top and become more prominent in relationship to the other works. In *Say Goodbye To Substance*, the works were installed to encourage a circumnavigation of *Popular Hymns*, and the different vantage points to other works provide the viewer with varying juxtapositions. For example, the painting *Cosmology Of Constant Sorrow* (based on an image from the Hubble telescope, manipulated both in form and palette and annotated, as if a star chart with subjective statements) hangs high on the wall opposite the entrance beyond *Popular Hymns*, perhaps implying where that "time capsule" might be headed.

⁹ "...but for Adam there was not found a helpmate for him. And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam and he slept, and he took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh instead thereof. And the rib which the Lord God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man And Adam said this is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man." Gen 2 21, 23

¹⁰—Both the diptych sculpture and the records used in *Popular Hymns* refer to ideas of creation and destruction, creative metamorphosis, and cycles of regeneration. Rather than a passive resignation that views these processes as

beyond our control, the underlying idea is one of individual agency. Though viewing the world with cynicism, Robleto rejects the melancholic futility that compromises many interpretations of the intrinsic narrative to the world, leaving hope as the only option. The systems he chooses to connect and explore—pop music, science, space travel—encapsulate a similarly poignant promise, or at least longing, to change the world for the better.

11—Theorist Roland Barthes (1915–1980) has described the photographic image's "has-been-there" quality, in which the photograph is "an emanation of the referent" that moves the viewer with the poignant fact of it as a past moment. It is an ontological connection to what it depicts: "from a real body...a sort of umbilical cord links the body of the photographed thing to my gaze." (Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, [New York: Hill and Wang, 1981] 80) The physicality of this metaphor and its evocation of a site of human creation aptly capture the power of Robleto's recast, reinvigorated objects—a presence through absence, where the soul of the material is manifest in the emotion it evokes.

12 "There is a difference between an idea and an ideology...ideas are not 'out there' waiting to be discovered, but are tools—like forks and knives and microchips—that people devise to cope with the world in which they find themselves...that ideas do not develop according to some inner logic of their own, but are entirely dependent, like germs, on their human carriers and environment. And...that since ideas are



FIG. 6

the ramifications are huge. I spent a great deal of time and effort making it look authentic; the idea of the piece is to present it as fact, not fiction. If the bone looks real, then the implications of it hit you much harder. If it were real, imagine how that would change the way society has evolved, based both on interpretations of gender that the creation myth was founded on in the Western world, as well as later notions of scientific truth. That was my mission—a work of art that would present an alternate route through history.

I love that there is openness to the interpretation of this piece, and my motivation wasn't necessarily that a matriarchal world is better than a patriarchal one. Wouldn't women hate, too? My suggestion was more, how did we get here, to a place where it is necessary to start over? Why do we have to try something else? Why does it even have to be considered?

I Won't Let You Say Goodbye This Time, 2001–2003 Re-activated NASA "Space Seeds" (tomato seeds flown in space and launched on a probe from the space shuttle Challenger, 1984, retrieved on the Columbia, 1990), cotton, dirt, custom-made porcelain cups, dust made from fragments of shuttle ceramic



FIG. 6

heat shields, letraset; Suite of 7 digital photographs, each $10 \frac{5}{8} \times 7 \frac{1}{4}$ in (image size), edition 7. Collection of the artist, courtesy Inman Gallery, Houston; ACME, Los Angeles; and Galerie Praz-Delavallade, Paris. (FIG. 6)

This brings me to *I Won't Let You Say Goodbye This Time*. Just like with *Men Are The New Women*, a lot of what I do is about the “what-if.” For me, it also becomes a bigger issue: the question of what art can do. Can you expect a change? Can it right a wrong? I am trying to find ways of making that happen, and this piece is one attempt. Here, the idea is to finish something left unfinished due to things beyond my control.¹⁰

In the late '70s and '80s, when the shuttle technology was introduced, part of the initial excitement was that it implied a greater accessibility to space for all of us. As a kid, I thought this incredible, and I remember that excitement so vividly. NASA saw potential in this excitement and began a PR campaign based on that accessibility. They built a probe called LDEF, which stands for the Long Duration Exposure Facility, designed to go aboard the shuttle. It had 57 compartments that they essentially opened up to the public—if you presented a proposal of what you wanted to include, it could be put on board. When you consider the security issues today, it is amazing that this could have happened. NASA literally mailed you a tray, you set up your experiment and mailed it back to them, and they put it on board. I couldn't even dream of this happening today. NASA allowed so much room that the experiments ranged from the complicated, such as scientists doing tests for new materials, to a bunch of kids who said “Hey, can we put some seeds on board?” There was no hard science at stake; it really wasn't about that. It was about nurturing somebody else's imagination and belief.

provisional responses to particular and unreproducible circumstances, their survival depends not on their immutability but on their adaptability." Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America*. (Farrar Straus & Giroux, 2002), pp. xi-xii.

13—While obviously based in historical events and facts, the works in Robleto's *Say Goodbye To Substance* are reconfigured to tell a different story of humanity, one that is deeply personal and subjective, but perhaps no less true than that found in books. If history is nothing more than an agreed-upon collective memory, how do we choose to remember what has happened? Which parts of the story define us as humans? Theorist Kaja Silverman has proposed that memories are never authentic or "real" but rather are post-event constructions, a means to create social and psychic structure. (Kaja Silverman, "Back to the Future," *Camera Obscura* 27. (1991): 109-32.) Thus, memory provides a means to understand or justify events without necessarily having an indexical relationship to the "real." Robleto's reconstructed creation myths, his "what-ifs," are no different than the false memories we have created to construct our own identities out of imagined pasts. Perhaps in a contemporary world where the sense of being anchored to a fixed reality has been permanently disturbed, if not totally unmoored, these subjective constructions have more weight in the proof of our own reality than other quantitative measures. This relationship between fact and

The LDEF went into space in 1984 aboard the Challenger and was deployed into orbit. It was designed to be in orbit for nine months. The shuttle scheduled to pick it up was the Challenger mission that exploded. After that, everything was put on hold, and the probe sat in orbit for seven years. Even when the space program got back up, LDEF was never a priority—it just floated, essentially lost in space. Finally, in 1990, it was brought back. From what I understand, all of the kids had grown up, people had moved on, and it was just forgotten; so NASA had a lot of stuff left that they didn't know what to do with. I obtained the tomato seeds that were aboard from NASA auctions, where they also had actual material remnants of the Challenger shuttle. I got some fragments from the heat shield, the tiles that protect the shuttle from burning up upon reentry.

Is it within my power as an artist to finish something that was never completed? I wanted to regrow the plants, the way they were supposed to be—I wanted the final object to exist and live. The project is presented as a cross between classroom science and hard science. The particular language of this science was that of Styrofoam cups, names written in crayon, cotton, seeds, and a Jack-and-the-Beanstalk fascination. I made seven cups—one for each of the lost Challenger crewmembers. Designed to look like Styrofoam, they are actually custom-made porcelain. When the porcelain was still in the powder stage, the dust from the heat shields was incorporated into them. I wanted to make the cups as if they were little heat shields, mini spaceships in a way—quite delicate and special but with a protective coating, so each seed is safe from the heat of explosion.

Digital photography needed to be a component, and this was the first time I had to grapple with the idea of the art object being a photograph of my sculpture. The objective was to capture the plants at the moment of bloom in digital imagery; the deeper implication is that nothing is really dead if you can store it properly. It was 20 years from the time the seeds went up to the time I sprouted them, and I wanted to capture that moment, forever, as they tried again. In *I Won't Let You Say Goodbye This Time*, my objective was to not let the past happen. This brings us back to the question of: Can art do that? Can I do that?

Each cup contains a crewmember's name, official role, and information that NASA had sent up with the seeds. I wanted to recapture each crewmember as well, right at that moment of imminent return, when I imagine they felt nothing but hope. I wanted the lighting to appear as though they were landing, with a shadow cast as if they were touching down from their mission. There is also a subtle shift in the atmospheric quality. I want the viewer to feel them symbolically in the objects, in the careful framing and emphasis on the

volume and three-dimensionality of the image. In the way they are presented, the crew can never die—at least not digitally.¹¹

The final part of the story, where art and life collide, is that the shuttle that brought the seeds back was the Columbia. Suddenly, unintentionally, this work embraced another tragedy. One of the things I grappled with when I saw the Columbia explode was that my project did not stop anything. It didn't do what I had invested so much into, and it hit me hard that I hadn't changed anything; it didn't stop their deaths. But in talking about it with Houston-based art dealer Kerry [Inman] and Whitney curator Shamim [Momin], I realized that the idea was about trying, and there is something to be said for the gesture. If all art is just trying, then it is still valid. It is a great thing to ponder what art can do for us, the moment in which those things are going on in us: there is such horrible destruction, but I am trying to create something out of it. There are parallels to those ideas throughout the installation. You just can't stop trying.

Cosmology Of Constant Sorrow, 2002 Polyurethane on panel, 72 x 48 in. Collection of artist; courtesy of Inman Gallery, Houston

Science Is Not The Way, 2001

Notes On Electronics (Make Me Whole Again), 2001

Dew Drops And Cobwebs, 2001

Everybody Loves To War, 2001

Hey, Let's Keep The Population Down!, 2001

Like A Mathematician Stumbling To Say I Love You, 2001

Suite of six archival Iris prints, each 17 x 11 in. (image size), 10th edition.

Collection of artist; courtesy of Inman Gallery, Houston

These digital prints were designed to accompany *Popular Hymns*. They are also “what-if” scenarios, other versions of history like *Popular Hymns*, but I chose the vocabulary for the flyers from entirely fictional events. They were based on design motifs from theatrical posters of the '30s and '40s as well as the color schemes used in the flyers for raves and clubs. They advertise things that couldn't happen, but also suggest what might happen if they did.

For example, *Science Is Not The Way* imagines three plays by three real-life scientists: Copernicus, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Werner Heisenberg. It plays on their personal and professional life stories; I think of them as three anarchists of science, who each fundamentally changed the way the world was perceived, such an extraordinary effect of the “what-if.” At the same time, *Science Is Not The Way* addresses my love/hate relationship with science, and what it can and cannot offer; science is just as susceptible as anything else to context that affects the way truth is written. It is also about our roles as humans: how we affect the things that we believe to be universal truths.¹² These three men all did that in various ways. Copernicus' play is *Ask Copernicus About Pushing Limits*; because of him, we moved on from the idea of one supposed universal truth. When I think about being radical, I just remember what he went through, and I realize how out of his league I still am. Similarly, Heisenberg let us understand that, whether we like it or not, uncertainty is part of everything we do. The title of his play is *Heisenberg May Have Slept Here*.

In another print, *Hey, Let's Keep The Population Down!*, I addressed the desire pop stars have to save the world, related to the larger question of whether or not we can alter anything. The history of pop stars trying to change the world is littered with terrible and self-serving deeds. So what would happen if three scientists got together to write a pop song to save the world? The three scientists featured in this advertisement for that song are each

fiction in Robleto's work is critical; but the real thrust lies in the impact of the work, not in its "truth." A time capsule should function as an authentic record of humankind's past, yet the selection of objects is as subjective as the viewers' interpretation of them. It is a desire to validate ourselves, to communicate our identity, rather than a real investment in truth. The knowledge of this falsity does not destroy the objects' power of evocation, in Robleto's world, the stories are real if they create individual subjectivity, meaning, and belief.

singing something totally different. If Robert Oppenheimer, the father of the atomic bomb, sang "Hey, let's keep the population down," it would mean something different from Diane Fosse singing it and trying to save gorillas or the jungle. And if Jacques Cousteau sang it, he would mean something else. It is just a weird pop song, but it means nothing without knowing who's singing it.

Your Moonlight Is In Danger Of Shining For No One, 2000–2001
Custom-made maple box, glass and hand-ground trinitite (glass produced during the first nuclear test explosion, when heat from the blast melted the surrounding sand), velvet, engraved brass label, 5 x 17 x 3 in. Collection of artist; courtesy of Inman Gallery, Houston

Your Moonlight Is In Danger Of Shining For No One uses the trinitite glass and is dedicated to Keith Moon, the drummer for The Who. He was the true rock and roll cliché, embodying the desire to "live fast, die young" in rock and roll history and mythology. He also revolutionized the art form of rock drumming, which is about sheer ferocity and aggression. It was his complete disregard for everything and yet complete focus that I was so intrigued with. He died in an explosion of his own life, because he could not sustain the level at which he was living. I wanted to make for him the Excalibur of drumsticks—one that you only pull out on special occasions. I made only one drumstick, out of the glass of the nuclear test explosion. Being made of glass, it can strike just once—but what a hit it would be. The implication is that in striking it, Moon would create this incredible explosion and obliterate himself in the process, in the same way that his own life, his drumming, did. His art was his downfall. The drumstick is presented in an open, delicate, handmade box, like a coffin—whether for presentation or use, it's hard to tell.

Light may be the most important underlying theme in this show. There are all kinds of light, from different sources: a nuclear explosion, a meteorite, starlight. *Your Moonlight Is In Danger Of Shining For No One* is that final, blinding light. It is a way of saying goodbye to Moon, and saying goodbye to a mythological understanding of rock and roll, to the romance of space, to a nostalgic belief in the perfect positivism of humanity. 13



Dario Robleto

Born in 1972 in San Antonio, Texas, Dario Robleto received his B.F.A. from the University of Texas at San Antonio. He currently lives in San Antonio. Robleto has exhibited his work in solo exhibitions including at the Inman Gallery, Houston, TX; the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, CA; Galerie Praz-Delavallade, Paris; ACME, Los Angeles; Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, TX; and ArtPace, San Antonio, TX. His work has also been featured in group exhibitions at such venues as The Renaissance Society, Chicago, IL; The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York; Gasworks, London; The Bronx Museum of the Arts, New York; Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, CA; Exit Art, New York; and DiverseWorks, Houston, TX.

WHITNEY



BACK: FIG. 7, COVER: FIG. 1

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This brochure accompanies the exhibition
Dario Robleto: Say Goodbye to Substance,
organized by Shamim M. Momin, branch
director and curator, Whitney Museum
of American Art at Altria.

COVER, BACK, AND PAGES 3, 5, 6, 9:
Photographs by Thomas R. Dubrock

PAGES 2 AND 15: *Say Goodbye to Substance*,
2003 (installation view). Collection of the artist;
courtesy of Inman Gallery, Houston.
Photographs by George Hirose